

Illinois Agricultural Revolution

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Have you ever taken a look around and contemplated how the state of Illinois became so rich in agriculture? This land had long been farmed by generation after generation, from the first settlers to the farmers of today. Fertile soil, complemented by the determination of many to improve farming techniques, has propelled Illinois into a leading agricultural area.

Illinois' earliest farmers lived mostly by subsistence farming, growing crops in small plots and gardens protected by split-rail fences. For an additional source of income, many farmers found it beneficial to raise livestock such as cattle and hogs.

Easy to cultivate, and adaptable to the prairie, corn soon became Illinois' most abundant staple crop. In these early years, long before plows and reapers were invented, farmers planted crops manually by dropping a single seed into a hole made by using an axe or pointed stick, and covering it with their boot heel. Then, besides consuming corn for their own pleasure, it could be ground into meal, or dried to feed livestock. Some of those who owned larger farms needed not to worry since most work was done by slaves.

Farmers soon began expanding their farms in southern Illinois by clearing timber, since they knew the ground beneath would be most fertile. In no time, they found themselves producing surplus foods. In order to reach the marketplace, farmers realized they must find a way to transport their products to growing cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, Memphis, and New Orleans. They exported their first goods mostly by river.

During the 1830s, farmers began producing larger and larger surpluses at harvest time, creating a need for an even better source of transportation. Canals were seen as a possible solution because of the recent success of the Erie Canal, which brought many immigrants into Illinois from the east. It was not long before farmers realized that this canal could be used to transport goods to the Atlantic Seaboard. As a result, Illinoisans built a canal linking Chicago with the Illinois and Mississippi River system. But before this canal--also known as the Illinois-Michigan Canal--was completed in 1848, the Illinois legislature voted to assemble a North-South railroad from Freeport to Cairo and from Lake Michigan diagonally southwest to connect to the north-south line. By the early 1880s, a railroad station was located within a few miles of almost every farm. Railroad construction rocketed Illinois' agricultural status sky-high. The railroad was given vast tracts of land by the federal government to help cover the construction costs, which in turn they sold to potential buyers at \$1.25 an acre. Simultaneously, cities in Illinois, with their rapid population growth demanded for more goods.

With land values doubling numerous times in the 1800s, many farmers became prosperous, and the amount of cultivated land increased greatly with the help of new tools and techniques. After the turn of the century, the appearance of the Model-T Ford, steam-powered tractors, and later gasoline powered tractors paved the way for farmers of today, making farming faster and less difficult.

Today, farmers must have the skills of computer technicians, scientists, mechanics, and even accountants. Illinois has been a leader in agriculture for well over a century. It has had the advantage of fertile, rolling land and a climate favorable for growing a variety of crops. Most importantly, Illinois farmers love the land and have worked tirelessly to create the agricultural

revolution of Illinois. [From Robert P. Howard, *Illinois*; Ronald E. Nelson, *Illinois: A Geographical Survey*; Lois A. Carrier, *Illinois*; Illinois State Historical Society, *Welcome to Illinois*, <http://www.historyillinois.org/frames/markers/345.htm> (Sept. 5, 2003); Illinois State Historical Society, *Thy Wondrous Story, Illinois*, <http://www.historyillinois.org/frames/markers/309.htm> (Sept. 5, 2003).]